DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 438 332 TM 030 651

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TITLE Factors Deterring Participation in Professional Activities.
PUB DATE 2000-00-00
NOTE 22p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Attitudes; *Extension Agents; *Participation; *Professional Development; Rural Extension; Time Management

ABSTRACT

This study investigated factors deterring county Extension agents from participating in professional development activities, such as in-service training, continuing education, and formal coursework, designed to help them grow as professionals. The Deterrent to Participation Scale-General, which was divided into eight factors, was designed so that a higher degree of agreement indicated a deterrent to participation. Responses were received from 321 extension agents, a response rate of 61%. Descriptive statistics were used to develop a respondent profile and to determine which factors received the highest rating, and thus prevented agents from participating in professional development activities. An item analysis showed the five items with the highest means were inconvenient location, inconvenient time, time away from family, time required for completion, and lack of interest. Of the five items with the highest means, two were from the factor Time Constraints and two were from the factor Lack of Convenience. The findings of this study indicate the survey population was homogeneous and that convenient location and time were critical to decisions to participate. When professional development activities were not seen as relevant, convenience became more important. (Contains 19 references.) (SLD)

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ED 438 332

Factors Deterring Participation in Professional Activities

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Abstract

This study investigated factors deterring county Extension agents from participating in professional development activities, such as in-service training, continuing education, and formal coursework, designed to help them grow as professionals.

The Deterrent to Participation Scale-General (DPS-G), which was divided into eight factors, was designed so that a higher degree of agreement indicated a deterrent to participation. Descriptive statistics were used to develop a respondent profile and to determine which factors received the highest rating preventing agents from participating in professional development activities.

An item analysis showed the five items with the highest means were inconvenient location, inconvenient time, away from family, time required for completion, and lack of interest. Of the five items with the highest means, two were from the factor Time Constraints and two were from the factor Lack of Convenience. The findings of this study indicate the survey population was homogeneous and convenient location and time were critical to decisions to participate. When professional development activities were not seen as relevant, convenience became more important.

Factors Deterring Participation in Professional Activities

As the Cooperative Extension System (CES) continues to face downsizing its workforce and becomes more accountable and cost effective, the demands for agents to deliver quality programs increase proportionately. These demands coupled with rapid technological and socioeconomic changes among Extension's clientele are producing tremendous challenges for all of the organization, especially agents at the county level. To provide the additional training needed for county agents to cope with and meet the needs of a rapidly changing society, the CES has redirected its professional improvement efforts so that more emphasis is placed on helping county agents retool to meet the ever-changing demands of their position. Agent participation in professional development activities is a keystone of their efforts. Low participation hampers efforts to improve the skills of the workforce, thus the need to identify factors deterring participation.

The mission of the Cooperative Extension System is to enable people to improve their lives and communities through learning partnerships whose purpose is to transform knowledge into practice. Its customers are the people and communities all across the country whose needs are best met through Extension's unique delivery model that takes the scholarship of the land-grant university system directly to the people. Grass-roots needs are assessed, programs are developed, and education and assistance are provided. New programming initiatives mean finding new and innovative delivery methods for what may be a new and specialized clientele. Along with new programs come demands on county agents. Such demands require that they must become more knowledgeable and diverse while working more efficiently. Continuing to aptly serve their county constituency is an on-going problem for today's county agents.

Although the need to train agents to meet the ever expanding and changing needs of increasingly diverse audiences was recognized as early as 1959 (Peterson, 1959), the specifics of how to redirect resources to expand professional development opportunities have seldom if ever been given. Continuation of professional improvement and the application of knowledge gained through professional development experiences are important to the perpetuation of existing and emerging programs and delivery techniques.

Statement of the Problem

Today's Cooperative Extension System is characterized by a multiplicity of program offerings and elite goals and standards being established, demanding new non-traditional educational methods and delivery systems. Likewise, Extension's clientele continues to grow more diverse in correspondence to rapid technological and socioeconomic changes. In the past, county Extension agents were assigned to one of four program areas: agriculture, home economics, 4-H, or community and economic development. Agents were encouraged to develop alliances with city and county officials and other local organizations. Today's agents may be given generic, multi-county job assignments—assignments that have little apparent relationship to their educational background—(Cory & Hass, 1957). They are expected to have at least a working knowledge in several disciplines, often working in areas in which they lack orientation or training. Extension provides professional development activities to meet these needs; however, agent participation in these activities is often disappointing.

The velocity of these changes has forced county agents, many of whom were trained more than 20 years ago, to work outside their boundary of comfort. Keeping abreast of the diversity of those being served and of the complexity of pressing issues

poses an on-going problem for agents. Attempting to do the job as it had been done in the past or following the directions of an equally untrained person does not seem to offer a viable solution. Yet, the success of educational programming efforts at the local level depends upon the capabilities of these individuals, creating a continuous need for professional improvement (Prawl, et al, 1984). If the skill level of county agent continues to lag behind the level needed to be able to offer new and innovative programs, the clientele served will begin to suffer. The expansion of knowledge is so rapid and the rate of obsolescence so swift that much of the knowledge gained during the pre-service period and the initial agent training is quickly outmoded.

Agents are annually given numerous chances to attend in-service training sessions, take continuing education courses or enroll in formal coursework. Often attendance at in-service courses is poor. Agents often appear reluctant to take advantage of opportunities designed to help them better understand their changing work environment and grow as a professional even though there is an increasing need for more systematic, structured activities designed to provide an avenue for Extension personnel to develop flexible programs tailored to the diverse audiences they must ultimately serve. While apathy and resistance to change are often major obstacles, heavy work loads, civic activities, staff disharmony, lack of financial resources, personnel turnovers, unprofessional attitudes or general unrest also contribute to the problem (McCleary & Hencley, 1965). Therefore, the problem is determining perceived deterrents that keep Extension agents from participating in professional development programs.

Purpose

Reasons county agents choose to not participate in professional improvement programs remain unclear although the need to correct training deficiencies continues to be a concern of Extension administration. The questions of why do some participate in professional development activities while others do not, and what are the factors that become barriers, or deterrents to participation, continue to be asked. To continue to meet the needs of a changing clientele, it is imperative to determine the reasons perceived by county agents as deterrents to participation in profession improvement activities.

This study investigated factors that keep county agents from participating in professional improvement activities, including in-service training, continuing education courses, formal courses and other professional development programs. Information gathered as a result of this study will help provide a better understanding of the factors thought to influence the decision of county agents to not participate in activities designed specifically to help them improve and become more effective professionals at a time of scarce human and financial resources. If these deterrents can be identified, then perhaps in-service and continuing education courses may be restructured so many of the perceived barriers to participation can be removed and agents can be trained or re-tooled to meet the demand of a changing work place and society.

The purpose, therefore, of this paper is to describe the population studied, the research instrument, and the deterrent factors involved. Descriptions of factors include a summary of the factors, ranking, and responses within factors.

Review of the Literature

Professional development activities are typically viewed as a way to remain current both technologically and within one's field of expertise (Boshier & Collins, 1985; Darkenwald & Valentine, 1985). Such activities are the career counterpart to one's pre-service educational training. Professional development training should be routine, on-going formative experiences for all personnel and an integral part of the career experience, providing ". . . for change, renewal, quality education/program, and professional competence" (Bishop, 1977, p. 1; Dunkin and Biddle, 1974). In addition to meeting the need for professionals to stay current in their chosen fields, huge expenditures of both money and energy are invested in quality in-service programs (Ryan, 1987; Houle, 1984).

Early research on participation in professional development established that those most in need of continuing education were the least likely to participate. Certain demographic factors were often found to be the reason for the difference in those who participate and those who do not. Non-participants were generally older, has less than a high school education, had low paying or no jobs, and were more frequently nonwhite female from rural backgrounds (Booth, 1961; Verner & Newberry, 1958). Contrarily, those who did participate in continuing education typically had a higher income, were younger, i.e., between 25 and 50 years of age, were married and were reasonably educated (Houle, 1961).

Motivation to participate in professional development activities has been a concern among researchers and administrators alike. According to Wright (1985), some of the reluctance to participate may stem from the professional's perception, seeing

professional development activities as extra work, bad past experiences with similar activities, or feeling a lack of ownership. Motivation to participate in professional development activities seemed to be mostly intrinsic. For example, the opportunity for increased self-confidence, a sense of achievement, the challenge of the task, and the opportunity to develop new skills and leadership related positively to participation.

Research suggests utilizing a multifaceted approach to improve or change one's perception and attitude toward participation (Chell, 1985). Not only should there be a variety of activities important to getting individuals involved in professional development, a variety of delivery methods is equally important (Iverson & Davis, 1980). Regardless of the approach used to engage professionals development and in-service training, the training and development must have clearly defined goals and objectives to be successful (Harris, 1989; Orlich, 1989; Ryan, 1987) and requires a commitment of time on the part of the participant (Ziglar & Savage, 1986).

Methodology

Subjects

Two groups of subjects—an expert panel and the survey population—were utilized in this study. The expert panel consisted of 12 professionals—the director, three middle-level management employees and 8 county agents—within the Alabama Cooperative Extension System.

The targeted survey population was county agents working in the CES in one of the 13 states in the Southern Region—Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. To assure an equal representation from each state, 40 agents were

systematically selected from each state for a total of 520 survey participants. Of those selected, 321 usable instruments were returned for a return rate of 61%.

Instrument Design

The instrument of choice was the Deterrent to Participation Scale-General (DPS-G) (Martindale and Drake, 1989). The DPS-G was designed to determine the deterrents, or factors, which prohibited professionals from participating in educational opportunities. The instrument consisted of two parts. The first part consisted of 34 Likert-type items, divided into eight factors or sub-scales. These factors were (a) Lack of Course Relevance, (b) Lack of Confidence, (c) Cost, (d) Time Constraints, (e) Lack of Convenience, (f) Lack of Interest, (g) Family Problems, and (h) Lack of Encouragement. The response choices for each item ranged from one to five, with one representing not important, two slightly important, three somewhat important, four important and five very important.

Since the identified population was different than the population for which the instrument was designed, the DPS-G was reviewed by a 12 member expert panel for face and content validity and clarity of instructions and to make recommendations for deleting or changing specific items for the intended subject population. The final instrument reflected feedback from the panel of experts.

The second part consisted of 11 items designed to obtain background information from each respondent. Six items were forced-field, and five items were open-ended.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected utilizing a survey method. The final two-part questionnaire, accompanied by a cover letter explaining the study and assuring confidentiality, was

mailed to each individual selected. A follow-up letter and a second copy of the instrument were sent to those who did not respond to the first mailing. Descriptive statistics were used to develop a demographic profile of the respondents and to derive the ranking of the reasons for non-participation.

Results and Discussion

Respondent Profile

There appeared to be little diversity among the population studied and the ethnic profile seemed similar to the overall population of the country although the numbers reported may be inconsistent with the population profile in a particular state. The majority (n=264; 82.3%) of the 321 individuals who responded to the questionnaire were white, 41 (12.9%) were black, and 16 (4.8%) were of other ethnic origin. Of the 174 (54.1%) females in the study, 149 (46.4%) were white—the single largest group participating in the study. Figure 1 below graphically depicts the distribution of respondents by age, and figure 2 shows representation by ethnicity. The age and ethnic skews are obvious.

Figure 1 Distribution by Age and Ethnicity

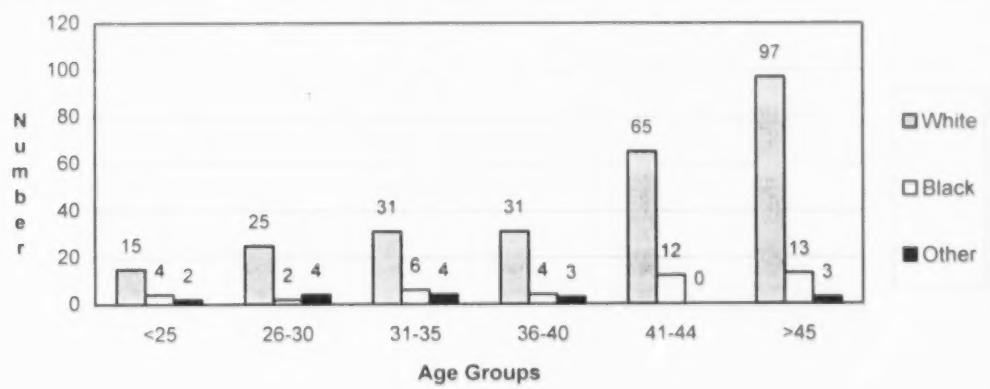


Figure 2. Distribution of Sample by Ethnicity and Gender.

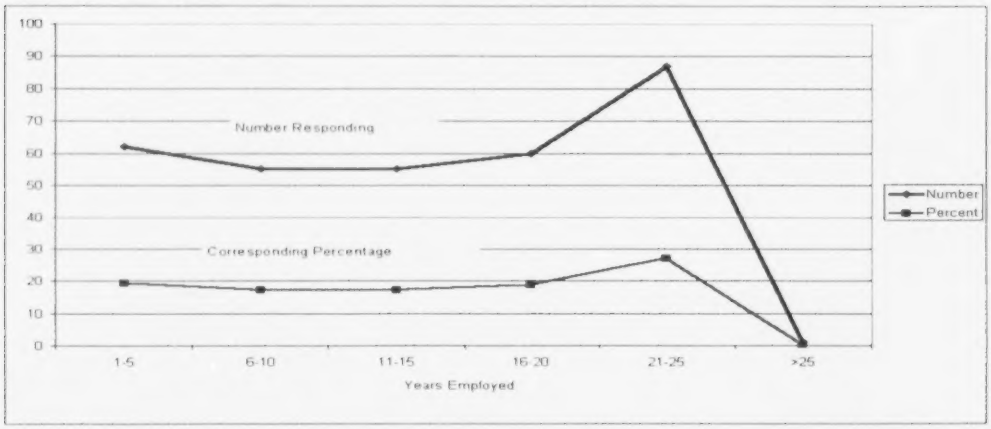
Figure 2 above graphically illustrates distribution of respondents by ethnicity and gender. The ethnic skew emphasizes the homogenous nature of the respondent group.

Of the four base program areas, i.e. agriculture, home economics, 4-H, or community and economic development, slightly over one-third (34.2%) of those responding reported working in the area of home economics. The second highest area was youth work or 4-H with 31.7%. These were followed by agriculture with 27.0%, administration with 5.0%, and 2.2% in other areas within the Extension system. Because of Extension's historical ties with USDA and its strong agricultural base these findings were unexpected. One would think that on a system-wide basis there would be more individuals working in agriculture than in any other base area. However, when looking at the number of female respondents, having more persons in the areas of home economics and youth, both of which were traditionally fields dominated by women, than in agriculture seems reasonable.

Although the population was mature with respect to age, i.e., almost two-thirds (n=199; 58.4%) of the respondents reported being over 40 years of age, 62 (19.3%) had been with the Extension System five years or less (Figure 3). In most organizations, it is

generally thought that a predominately older work force is generally more experienced, having been with the organization a long time. Conversely, only 89 (27.7%) had been employed by Extension over 21 years. These observations may be attributed to a mobile society whereby one may change jobs several times during one career. However, career buy-outs, i.e., earlier retirements, have also been common place during the past five year period causing senior Extension employees to leave their careers in numbers larger than those normally expected as a simple function of retirement plans.

Figure 3. Distribution of Sample by Years of Employment



Seventy-four percent of the respondents were married, and 58.5% had children still living at home. The majority (62%) reported that they were active in civic organizations and 59.2% reporting having completed a masters degree.

Responses to Deterrent to Participation Scale

The 34 items of the Deterrents to Participation Scale—General were ranked by their means from highest to lowest. The five specific items with the highest means in the current study were compared to the five items with the highest means from the original study. The five items ranked highest in the present study as deterrents to not participating

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in professional development activities were inconvenient location, inconvenient time, away from family, lack of study time, and time required to finish. When comparing the item means for this study with those in the Darkenwald & Valentine (1985) study, response patterns were very similar. The exception was not being able to attend regularly which was ranked fourth in the earlier study (Table 1).

Table 1. Comparison of Highest Ranked Item Means

Items	Current Study		Darkenwald & Valentine Study	
	M	Rank	M	Rank
Inconvenient location	3.49	1	3.00	2
Inconvenient time	3.28	2	3.02	1
Time away from family	2.84	3	2.47	5
Lack of time for studying	2.83	4.5	2.93	3
Amount of time to finish	2.83	4.5	2.40	6
Could not attend regularly	2.51	11.5	2.54	4

Items reported most frequently as being deterrents earlier are still deterrents to participating in professional development and training in today's Extension System's workplace. Locations selected for professional development activities coupled with time selected have consistently been a problem for professionals. Traveling long distances to attend professional development activities often means having to be away from family for several days at a time. For many, especially those with children still at home and those

who are single, being away for an extended period of time creates other problems such as child care and re-arranging work related responsibilities. The age distribution of the respondents also indicates that many in this group may also have responsibilities for aging parents, thereby creating another problem that would have to be dealt with during periods away from home.

When comparing the five items receiving the lowest rankings, or those that were not perceived as barriers to participation, with the items receiving the lowest rankings in the prior study, few similarities were found (Table 2). Lack of encouragement by friends and health problems were the only items in common on both studies. The confidence

Table 2. Comparison of Lowest Ranked Item Means

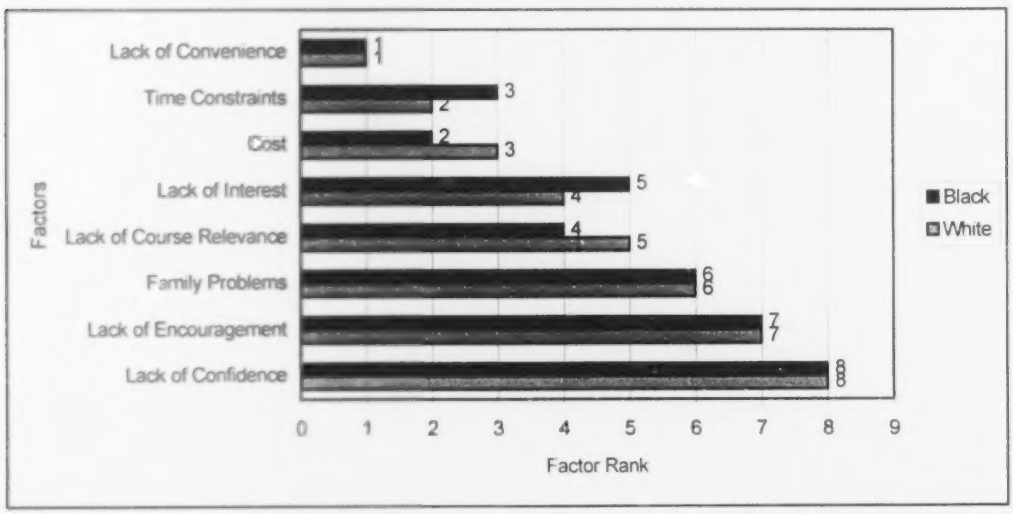
Items	Current Study		Darkenwald & Valentine Study	
	M	Rank	M	Rank
Could not compete with younger students	1.12	34	1.47	26
Lack of encouragement from friends	1.28	33	1.28	33
Health problems	1.32	32	1.19	34
Felt too old to take course	1.35	31	1.42	29
Lack of confidence in learning ability	1.44	30	1.62	19
Lack of transportation	1.71	25	1.37	32
Failed to meet course requirements	1.68	26.5	1.41	31
Family problems	1.68	26.5	1.44	30

indicated by the present population in their ability to compete with younger students may be contributed to age and educational attainment. With almost 60 percent being over 40 years of age and an equal percent having completed at least a masters degree, one would not expect the age or the participant or that of potential classmates to be a deterrent to become involved in course work, continuing education, or professional development activities.

The 34 individual items were collapsed in eight predetermined factors, and factor means were calculated and ranked for selected demographic variables, i.e., ethnicity, gender, and marital status. The results of ranking the factors means were as expected. When the rankings were examined with respect to selected demographic factors, rankings were still very similar, as expected.

Figure 4 shows a comparison of factor ranking by ethnicity. The two groups viewed time constraints and cost somewhat differently. The minority population

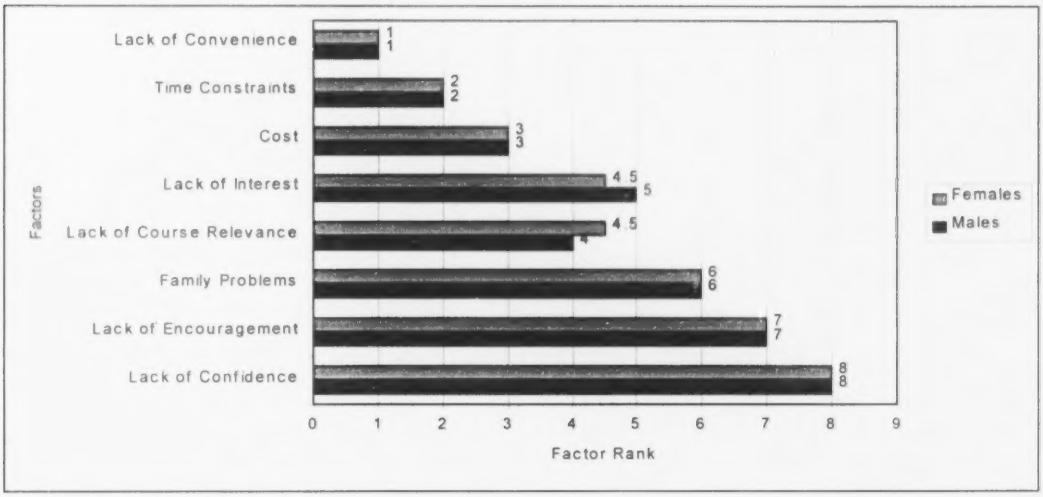
Figure 4. Factor Ranking by Ethnicity



issue as opposed to their non-minority counterparts who view time as a more crucial element for participating in activities to help them grow as professionals.

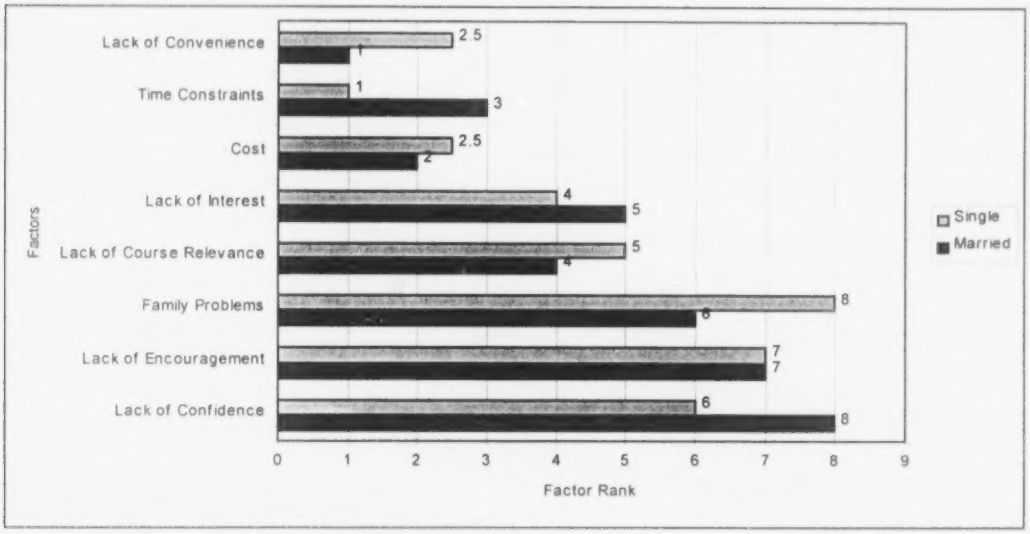
Convenience, time and cost were viewed identically by both genders (Figure 5) as the major deterrents to being able to participate in professional development activities. The tiebreakers were course relevance and interest. Females viewed the two equally; however, males were more likely to attend such activities if they viewed them as relevant.

Figure 5. Factor Ranking by Gender.



Marital status apparently had more influence on which factors were perceived as prohibitory to participating in activities designed to help them improve professionally and as a result, there was more variation in the mean ranking of the time factors. The factors Lack of Convenience and Time Constraints (Figure 6) had the highest means for married and single persons, respectively. Married persons saw Family Problems as more of a deterrent than did single persons who perceived a Lack of Confidence as the biggest reason to not participate in professional development activities.

Figure 6. Factor Ranking by Marital Status.



Conclusions and Recommendations

This study was designed to investigate the factors or reasons perceived by county Extension agents as deterrents to participation in professional improvement activities. A review of the literature identified factors traditionally affecting participation; this study investigated the perception of agents regarding the degree to which the identified factors impacted their participation in professional development activities. The study examined these factors as a whole and in terms of selected demographic variables.

The study found that convenience in terms of location and time were the most important items in individual's decisions to participate. This suggests that Extension administrators should place more consideration on the impact time and location has on participation rates at inservice training sessions. Meetings at convenient times and locations that do not keep individuals away from their families or interfere with other activities for long periods of time should result in higher rates of participation. Offering

training sessions at multiple locations, repeated periodically, might boost participation rates as well. Distance education systems, especially internet-based training, would allow individuals to participate at the time and location of their choosing, minimizing interference with work, family, or other activities.

These findings are particularly interesting in light of the fact that all of the individuals surveyed in this study work within the University land grant system. Many of the universities offer tuition wavers or credits for coursework taken. All professional development activities, including mileage and per diem, offered through the system are paid for by the system and are offered as a part of the normal work load.

While relevance and lack of interest per-se were not primary factors identified by respondents as influencing participation; when program offerings are not seen as relevant or interesting convenience becomes more important. People find ways to do the things they believe are important. Considering the age and educational level of the average participant in this study, motivation, challenge, and relevance are essential to engaging these professionals in activities they perceive as meaningful. Administrators should make a positive effort to ensure that program offerings are of sufficient quality to challenge participants and that relevance to their jobs is emphasized. Further, there needs to be some motivation for participation beyond simply being told or required to attend. Participation in training or programs of advanced study should be greater if there is an incentive beyond personal satisfaction. Motivation and encouragement are not the same. The agents' responses indicate they are encouraged to participate or at least that lack of encouragement is not a deterrent. Participation levels indicate encouragement alone is not

sufficient reason for participation. The implication for administrators is the need to move from encouragement to motivation.

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